

THE IMPORTANCE  
OF  
BEING EARNEST  
OSCAR WILDE



EDITED BY  
MICHAEL PATRICK GILLESPIE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Oscar Wilde  
THE IMPORTANCE OF  
BEING EARNEST



AUTHORITATIVE TEXT  
BACKGROUNDS  
CRITICISM

*Edited by*  
MICHAEL PATRICK GILLESPIE  
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY  
*New York • London*

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The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium  
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.

Composition by PennSet, Inc.

Manufacturing by the Maple-Vail Book Group, Binghamton.

Production manager: Benjamin Reynolds.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Wilde, Oscar, 1854–1900.

The importance of being Earnest : authoritative text, backgrounds,  
criticism / Oscar Wilde ; edited by Michael Patrick Gillespie.

p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-393-92753-9 (pbk.)

1. Identity (Psychology)—Drama. 2. Wilde, Oscar, 1854–1900.  
Importance of being Earnest. 3. Foundlings—Drama. 4. England—  
Drama. I. Gillespie, Michael Patrick. II. Title. III. Series.

PR5818.I4 2005

822'.8—dc22

2005052741

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110-0017  
[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House,  
75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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## Preface

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 (though later in life he would claim 1856 as the year of his birth). He attended the exclusive Portora Royal School in Enniskillen (as did Samuel Beckett half a century later), and in 1874, after three years at Trinity College, Dublin, he received a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford. While there, Wilde distinguished himself academically, earning a rare double first in his final exams; artistically, winning the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Ravenna*; and socially, becoming notorious around the campus for his "art for art's sake" credo.

After leaving Oxford in 1878, Wilde quickly established himself in London, first as a personality and gradually as an author. Early in the 1880s, Wilde's charm and wit made him a favorite at dinner parties, and his friendships with notables such as Lillie Langtry and James A. McNeill Whistler and his association with people caricatured in *Punch* and the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* provided broader notoriety. By the end of the decade, he had become a man with a growing reputation as a successful lecturer in America and England, as the editor of *Woman's World*, and as an engaging author of fairy tales, short stories, and critical essays.

Wilde's greatest creative period was from 1890 to 1895. His two best known works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–91) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), bracketed a number of commercially and critically successful West End plays—*Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1895)—as well as a stylized drama—*Salomé* (1892)—written in French. Wilde's writings were in demand, and his popularity was at its zenith. When Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, opened on Valentine's Day 1895 at the St. James's Theatre in London's West End, it achieved immediate critical and popular acclaim. However, within a short time, events in Wilde's personal life produced a radical change in his professional career.

Early in 1895 Wilde brought an unsuccessful libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. After Queensberry's acquittal, Wilde was arrested for homosexual offenses reported during the course of Queensberry's

trial. Despite an initial mistrial, Wilde was eventually convicted and sentenced on May 25 to two years at hard labor. The consequent scandal led to a premature cancellation of the run of *Earnest*, Wilde's financial ruin, and the virtual disappearance of his writings from booksellers' stocks.

During his time in prison, Wilde wrote *De Profundis*, and upon his release he left England for the Continent. For the next three years, he lived a transient and often impoverished existence, mainly in France. During this time of financial strain, poor health, and social ostracism, Wilde's creative abilities were at a near standstill. Though he spoke of several creative projects, he actually wrote only *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, brought out by Leonard Smithers in 1898. The next year Smithers published *The Importance of Being Earnest* in an edition for which Wilde corrected the proofs. For the most part, however, Wilde subsisted on the charity of friends. He died in Paris on December 30, 1900, and is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery.

Despite the sad circumstances of Wilde's final years, the ebullient *Earnest* remains one of the most frequently performed works in contemporary repertory. This durability comes by and large from the range of interpretive possibilities that the play continues to sustain. Although characters, plotlines, and settings appear at first glance both familiar and predictable, many productions have highlighted subtle features of its structure. The 1993 West End revival of the play offered a memorable instance of this quality. Maggie Smith's portrayal of Lady Bracknell as a woman whose domineering manner only partially masks her *nouvelle venue* insecurities brought to the foreground the elements of the play that presented sophisticated critiques of the foibles of humanity, as relevant today as they were a century ago.

Despite this variability, some readers and views continue to pigeon-hole *Earnest* as simply a charming and whimsical farce. Certainly, the play's humorously effective use of highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements evokes justifiable praise of its farcical qualities. Nonetheless, cataloging it in this fashion and looking no further into the intricacies of its structure overlooks its considerable insights on the human condition.

Gently but persistently, *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes up large issues of class, gender, sexuality, identity, and other topics that engage the interest of contemporary readers. Like any great work of art, despite the specificity of its context, the rich and often sardonic representations of human nature allow *Earnest* to transcend its setting, time period, and local features, and to create broad resonance with its readers' and viewers' experiences.

One sees this trait neatly illustrated in the opening exchange of the play, between a smug and self-satisfied young man, Algernon Moncrieff, and his worldly-wise servant Lane (see pp. 5–6). Their discussion runs from Algy's abilities as a pianist, to the amount of wine young men and their servants consume, to the state of married life. In every instance wit dominates, but a dark undercurrent gives deeper meaning to the dialogue.

The flippancy of Algernon and the languor of Lane combine to comment profoundly on the complacency of the financially secure and the callousness of those who must make their own way in the world. On the surface, both Algernon and Lane understand the game being played—the master and servant match wits with the implicit understanding that the master must always win the contest. However, the sophistication and cynicism of Lane's responses go well beyond Algernon's ability to articulate a picture of the world he inhabits, and the deft manner of the butler does more than deflect and then undercut the attempted witticisms of the young man. Without trumpeting a heavy-handed didactic message, Lane's responses call attention to a range of social issues and class restraints that condition ordinary life.

Such intricate exchanges animate every scene of *Earnest*, and they extend interpretive possibilities that ensure ongoing pleasures in viewing and reading. The complexity of Wilde's characters and the suppleness of his plots continue to emerge with every encounter with the play. The material assembled in this volume, especially the critical essays, aims to highlight the interpretive potential of the play from textual, biographical, cultural, and personal perspectives.

The structure of the edition is fairly straightforward. Although Wilde originally wrote the play in four acts, he cut it to three at the urging of George Alexander, who owned St. James's Theatre and who played the part of the original Jack Worthing. The text here is the three-act version first published by Smithers in 1899, with a few typographical errors silently corrected. Following the play are excised portions, originally from Acts II and III, which Wilde combined into Act II. The three-act form of *Earnest* now dominates productions and editions, and the juxtaposition of deleted scenes offers students the opportunity to judge whether this approach is the best representation of the play. Additional scholarly materials follow these texts to stimulate further discussions of Wilde's work.

"Backgrounds" consists of selections from prominent cultural commentators—Karl Beckson, Joseph Donohue, and Regenia Gagnier—who have written about Wilde and the 1890s. Their essays provide a context for the period from the perspective of contemporary literary critics. This approach does double duty: It not only gives students a grounding in the period, but it also provides

sources that will support classroom discussions centered on interpretations based upon cultural criticism.

"Criticism" is comprised of two parts. The first, "Reviews and Reactions," contains a selection of contemporary responses to the play. It features prominent reviewers—among them William Archer, George Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells—reacting to the play's premiere. Most are positive, though Shaw's well-known dissenting view gives a sense of how difficult it is to discern the complex narrative patterns of *Earnest* in a single viewing. The second part, "Essays in Criticism," samples a variety of approaches to interpreting the work. It is weighted toward analyses appearing over the last few decades, with diversity standing as the key feature of this collection. After E. H. Mikhail's discussion of the four-act version of the play, Eva Thienpont offers a convincing argument for using the three-act version as the standard text. Camille Paglia and Christopher Craft offer contrasting views of the sexual dynamics animating the play. The pieces by Peter Raby and myself highlight alternative, though in the end complementary, conceptions of the function of wit in *Earnest*. Richard Haslam addresses the implications of Wilde's Irish identity in the interpretive process. In making these selections, I sought to reflect the changes in critical theory that have accrued over the past few years and to use the companion essays to the text to make readers aware of the range of valid interpretive approaches that make Wilde's work accessible.

While I sincerely believe that these essays provide a solid basis for students to begin to grasp the complexities of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I must emphasize that this volume marks the initiation of analysis rather than offering the final words on the topic. The energy and enthusiasm Wilde's play continues to generate comes from its ability to engage and surprise us with every reading or viewing. The words of Enobarbus, describing Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, prove equally applicable to Wilde's play: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety." It is the infinite variety of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that inspires continuing discussions and ever new interpretations.

A great many people have contributed to this project, and I realize that to a great extent whatever success it enjoys relates directly to their efforts. I wish particularly to thank Brian Baker, Carol Bemis, Joseph Donohue, Darcy Dupree, A. Nicholas Fagnoli, Paula Gillespie, Warwick Gould, Richard Haslam, Merlin Holland, Tim Machan, Russell Maylone and the Special Collections staff at Northwestern Library, Michael McKinney, Donald Mead, Valerie Murrenus, John Navarre, Ben Reynolds, Albert Rivero, David Rose, and Joan Sommers and the Inter-Library Loan staff at Marquette University.

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The Text of  
THE IMPORTANCE OF  
BEING EARNEST

*A Trivial Comedy  
for Serious People*





To  
Robert Baldwin Ross  
In Appreciation  
In Affection



## *The Persons of the Play*

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.,<sup>1</sup> of the Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire  
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF, his friend  
REV. CANON CHAUSBLE, D.D.,<sup>2</sup> Rector of Woolton  
MERRIMAN, butler to Mr. Worthing  
LANE, Mr. Moncrieff's manservant  
LADY BRACKNELL  
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX, her daughter  
CECILY CARDEW, John Worthing's ward  
MISS PRISM, her governess

## *The Scenes of the Play*

Act I *Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.*  
Act II *The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton*  
Act III *Morning-Room at the Manor House, Woolton*

*Time: The Present*

### *First Act*

*Scene— Morning-room in ALGERNON's flat in Half-Moon Street.<sup>1</sup> The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.*

(LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters.)

ALGERNON Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE Yes, sir.

ALGERNON And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

1. Justice of the Peace.

2. Doctor of Divinity.

1. Located in the fashionable West End of London.

LANE Yes, sir. (*Hands them on a salver.*<sup>2</sup>)

ALGERNON (*Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.*)  
Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON (*Languidly.*) I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE Thank you, sir. (*LANE goes out.*)

ALGERNON Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders<sup>3</sup> don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

(*Enter LANE.*)

LANE Mr. Ernest Worthing.

(*Enter JACK.*)

(*LANE goes out.*)

ALGERNON How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON (*Stiffly.*) I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock.<sup>4</sup> Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK (*Sitting down on the sofa.*) In the country.

ALGERNON What on earth do you do there?

2. A small tray commonly used for serving refreshments or for presenting letters, visiting cards, or similar items.

3. A vague designation referring to anyone not included in the refined social circles in which Algernon travels.

4. Typically the time to take a light meal of tea and sandwiches or cakes.

JACK (*Pulling off his gloves.*) When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON And who are the people you amuse?

JACK (*Airily.*) Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?<sup>5</sup>

JACK Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON How immensely you must amuse them! (*Goes over and takes sandwich.*) By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK May I ask why?

ALGERNON My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

JACK How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court<sup>6</sup> was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven— (*JACK puts out his hand to take a sandwich. ALGERNON at once interferes.*) Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (*Takes one and eats it.*)

JACK Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. (*Takes*

5. A county in England located in the west midlands.

6. Established in 1857, the Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, based in London, heard pleas for divorce that had previously come before the church courts. At the time of the play, men could obtain divorce for adultery, but women had to prove cruelty or desertion in addition to their husband's adultery.

*plate from below.*) Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK (*Advancing to table and helping himself.*) And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON Well, in the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK Your consent!

ALGERNON My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. (*Rings bell.*)

JACK Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.  
(*Enter LANE.*)

ALGERNON Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room<sup>7</sup> the last time he dined here.

LANE Yes, sir. (*LANE goes out.*)

JACK Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard<sup>8</sup> about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

(*Enter LANE with the cigarette case on a salver. ALGERNON takes it at once. LANE goes out.*)

ALGERNON I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. (*Opens case and examines it.*) However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

7. Because of the lingering aroma of tobacco smoke, rooms in houses, hotels, and clubs were often set apart as places for smoking.

8. This is a shorthand designation for the location of the Metropolitan (i.e., London) police headquarters and a synonym for the force. At the time of the play, Scotland Yard was located on a tiny street off Whitehall called New Scotland Yard; it occupied the entire street.



JACK Of course it's mine. (*Moving to him.*) You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON Oh! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON Your aunt!

JACK Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells.<sup>9</sup> Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON (*Retreating to back of sofa.*) But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? (*Reading.*) "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK (*Moving to sofa and kneeling upon it.*) My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. (*Follows ALGERNON round the room.*)

ALGERNON Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Taking it from case.*) "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany." I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. (*Puts the card in his pocket.*)

9. Located in the county of Kent, Tunbridge Wells is southeast of London.